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ABSTRACT

The dawn of the electronic age has altered the role of the school librarian: the position is less of a warehouse manager and more of a reference consultant, the emphasis is access to information rather than collection development, and the librarian is an information center manager, specialist, and teacher of information technology. School restructuring, more student-centered teaching methods, and the change from a passive learning environment into an active one require collaboration between librarians and classroom teachers to meet the information needs of students. Librarians must become proficient in the use of the new technologies to promote them and instruct students and teachers in their use. As access to information overtakes ownership of information, librarians seek out and evaluate online and other electronic sources to meet the information needs of patrons. Librarians must teach students and teachers to be discriminating users of information, teach ethical use of the materials received, and form access policies and acceptable use agreements. The expanding functions of the library necessitate that the librarian become an information center manager, developing skills to manage the different groups of people who will work in the library. The librarian is the campus expert in information location and management and thus in the best position to be on the forefront of information technology and to train others in its use. The school librarian in the electronic age expands the services available from the library to include computer-based data and sophisticated information-seeking strategies. Working in concert with classroom teachers and curriculum experts, librarians form a comprehensive team designed to enhance student academic achievement and critical thinking skills necessary for success in lifelong endeavors. (Author/SWC)

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Introduction

The dawn of the Electronic Age has occasioned the call for the demise of the school librarian. "Why have school librarians?" the skeptics call, "when everything will be available online?" Of course, this reduces a complex argument to an emotional hot-button. Such oversimplification draws attention to the changing role of the school librarian in an era in which the position is less of a warehouse manager and more of a reference consultant to teachers and students while still retaining the instructional focus that has always been a part of the position. Farmer (1995) characterizes the position as the educational equivalent to business' CIO - chief information officer.

As schools change from passive learning environments into active ones, the role of the librarian has to adjust as well. School restructuring requires that the librarian venture from the library to collaborate with teachers and administrators. The addition of technology into the learning environment enhances information retrieval and offers the librarian a new entree into the classroom curriculum. New, more student-centered teaching methods demand the support of information resources and training in their use. Library technology reaches beyond the library walls via computer networks to put information resources into the hands of end users at the point of need. With networks linking all areas of the modern school, the best place to access information may no longer be within the walls of the traditional library.

From warehousing to consulting

School librarians expand their areas of influence to include the classroom when they collaborate with classroom teachers to meet the information needs of students. Moving beyond the "warehouse concept" of traditional libraries, librarians strike out into classrooms/departments to consult with classroom teachers. Suggesting resources, locating and acquiring needed materials, recommending strategies, facilitating use of technologies, and instructing students and teachers in optimal information-seeking methods replace the traditional librarian tasks of material circulation. Many traditional tasks may be assigned to clerks, leaving the professional free to work directly with students and teachers (Craver, 1994).

Librarians assist teachers and students to search out their information needs, critically evaluate the materials they locate, and use technological means to synthesize their findings into new knowledge (Brown, 1990). Librarians must become proficient in the use of the new technologies to promote them and instruct students and teachers in their use. As students become more self-directed learners, the librarian acts as a resource person in the students' quest for supporting information and the development of appropriate presentation strategies.

Consulting duties added to an already burgeoning schedule gives the librarian more than enough work to fill the day. In fact, without an aide to assist in the clerical duties required to circulate materials, program effectiveness will be compromised.

Collection development vs. access to information

As more teaching supplements and topical information are made available in electronic formats, school libraries find themselves lagging behind in print acquisitions. Librarians look more to online and other electronic sources to meet the information needs of students and teachers. Access to information, whether by CDROM, Internet, online database, video, telefacsimile, microform or traditional print, is overtaking ownership of information as an evaluation benchmark. Acquisitions and selection criteria take on entirely new meaning when considering access to online services. Traditional materials evaluation measures have little meaning when applied to Internet sites. New paradigms of selection and evaluation evolve with new technologies and their application to the classroom and resource center (Craver, 1994).

Even though many information and literature sites exist on the Internet, few believe that online data will take the place of all books and audio-visuals. Librarians seek out and evaluate appropriate information resources online. They also identify and select good age-appropriate and curriculum-specific literature. Knowledge of students and curriculum remains the foundation of good school library service regardless of the format of the information provided or the source.

Worldwide computer networks make sharing resources easier than ever before. Libraries advertise their holdings to the world, offering to loan materials on a cooperative basis. Libraries which participate in such arrangements offer their patrons a wider variety of materials from which to choose. Librarians can count on cooperative libraries to provide

infrequently used materials. Some cooperative library systems even designate certain facilities to specialize in particular subject areas, allowing other units to broaden or concentrate their own collections. The librarian must be well versed in the collection development policy of the cooperative to properly plan and select materials to complement those available through diverse means.

In teaching students and teachers to be discriminating users of information the librarian must also teach ethical use of the materials retrieved. Copyright and plagiarism become significant issues when digital copies may be seamlessly integrated into student work. The librarian is often the only person in a building with any training in these legal issues. Librarians play an important role in the development of access policies and acceptable use agreements delineating how and when materials retrieved may be legally and properly used. Designing documentation and record-keeping systems to assist patrons in legal compliance is an important service and one that will become essential as copyright and license enforcement increase.

Information center manager

The information explosion has created far more information than one school library could possibly contain. The librarian is responsible for locating, acquiring, disseminating and tracking information resources of many types. This job might include database searching, interlibrary loans, monitoring Internet newsgroups, or maintenance of a computerized library information system. All these tasks involve managerial expertise equivalent to that required of corporate information center managers. The librarian manages the budget and evaluates and selects new materials for purchase or access.

As tasks grow in the library, the need for support staff increases. As information center manager, the librarian will supervise and evaluate the performance of technical and clerical assistants. Training of these assistants will take a significant amount of time and expertise. Since budget may be slim, some of these paraprofessionals may need to assist with duties once exclusive to professionals. Under the supervision of a librarian, paraprofessionals may become highly proficient in database searching, computer catalog maintenance, and other tasks. Student assistants and parent volunteers may also compose the cadre of workers. Different management skills are necessary to manage these two groups.

Always a teacher

Craver calls the teaching role of the school librarian the "information technologist" (1994). Emphasizing the necessity of teaching staff and students to operate in an electronic milieu, she points out that guiding patrons to select the most appropriate source is a sizeable task requiring concentrated analysis. This analysis is not unlike that done by a classroom teacher in trying to determine which instructional methods will be appropriate for the different learning styles in a classroom. Fitting electronic resources into the patterns of information location and application is a task particularly suited to the training and skills of the librarian. Teachers constitute a significant portion of the librarian's instructional time. As the campus expert in information location and management, the librarian is in the best position to be on the forefront of information technology and to train others in its use (Pappas, 1995). Staff development activities serve to showcase the library and the librarian as the "person in the know" to whom one may turn for suggestions and advice. When faculty members look to the librarian as the information expert, students learn to rely on that person for guidance in information matters, as well.

Summary

None of these roles precludes the traditional tasks of reading guidance, organization of resources, and selection of materials in multiple formats which were the foundation of library service long before information went electronic.

The school librarian in the electronic age expands the services available from the library to include computer-based data and sophisticated information-seeking strategies. Working in concert with classroom teachers and curriculum experts, librarians form a comprehensive team designed to enhance student academic achievement and critical thinking skills necessary for success in lifelong endeavors.

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